



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1988 Volume II: Immigrants and American Identity

Ethnic Humor

Guide for Curriculum Unit 88.02.04
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Ethnicity is the generational structure by which a group draws attention to its cultural and historical particularity. As such, it affords self-identification to an individual within the larger context of the American scene. A study of any aspect of ethnicity is thus particularly helpful to high school students who are part of a school attended by a variety of ethnic groups, and who are in the developmental stage of establishing their own identity.

A study of the particular aspect of ethnic humor lends itself in a pleasurable, natural way not only to the issue of self-identification, but to improving a student's knowledge base and to expanding his/her skills of critical thinking, reading, and writing. Ethnic humor derives from two roots: humor which disparages the group, the humor which strengthens the connections within the group. Frequently, a group combines elements in its humorous expression, thereby revealing its awareness of the out-group's feelings while expressing the in-group's reactions.

Within the various ethnic groups, a commonality is revealed through the humor—ultimately all peoples wish to be accepted on their own merits—so that the study of ethnic humor adds a further dimension: an understanding of other groups and, perhaps, an unmasking of prejudice about other groups.

The unit necessitates that the teacher give the students some background on the nature and extent of immigration into the United States and the reactions of those already part of mainstream America. Because the Black population was prevented from being part of that mainstream, Black ethnic humor is an appropriate part of the unit.

Updated materials for the unit may be found in cartoons, comic strips, television, movies, and magazine articles. Sequences from books and plays are, of course, always recommended. Generally, if the teacher uses his/her own ethnic background initially, the teacher will probably be most comfortable in raising the necessary issues and, by establishing a non-judgmental climate, will enable students to express their feelings about their own ethnicity, and that of the other students.

Among the necessary issues raised, at least two are key: how true are the stereotypes which are found as the basis of many ethnic jokes; and can one be a "true" American if one speaks with an accent or dialect? The students' responses should be used to strengthen, in as positive a sense as possible, their self-perception as a later generation of immigrant forebears; and should be especially useful to those students who are immigrants.

(Recommended for Humanities classes, grades 10-12; and English classes, grades 10-12)

Key Words

Humor Literature Ethnicity Ethnic

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